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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MOSCOW 001310

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/26/2017  
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KDRM](#) [SOCI](#) [RS](#)  
SUBJECT: OVERWHELMING POLICE PRESENCE STOPS MARCH IN  
NIZHNIY NOVGOROD

REF: MOSCOW 1240

Classified By: Ambassador William J. Burns. Reason: 1.4 (d).

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Summary  
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¶1. (C) Nizhniy Novgorod authorities used an overwhelming law enforcement presence to thwart the efforts of several hundred "Other Russia" activists to stage a "March of Dissenters" down a central pedestrian avenue on March 24. Eyewitnesses report that a number of would-be marchers were beaten. About one hundred participants, including as many as 12 journalists, were detained by police. "Other Russia" leaders Garry Kasparov, Eduard Limonov, former Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov, and activist Irina Khakamada were notably absent. Human Rights Ombudsman Vladimir Lukin reportedly urged Mayor Vadim Bulavinov in a March 24 telephone call to rein in the police. We are expressing out concern about the behavior of the police and local authorities to the GOR. Suggested press guidance, para 8. End summary.

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March Pre-empted  
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¶2. (SBU) City authorities on March 24 followed through on their promise to crush any effort by "Other Russia" and affiliated organizations to stage the third in a series of "March of Dissenters" in central Nizhniy Novgorod. (The first two marches had been held in Moscow and St. Petersburg.) According to press reports and eyewitness accounts, as many as 20 thousand (sic) uniformed law enforcement officials, many bused in from other cities, detained passengers arriving by train on the morning of March 24, then wrapped up anyone attempting to visit the city's central square in advance of the planned march. (Note: We find this figure difficult to believe, as larger rallies in Moscow are "managed" by forces numbering closer to 7 thousand.)

¶3. (SBU) Oksana Chelysheva of the Nizhniy Novgorod-based Russian-Chechen Friendship Society told us that among those detained were the local leaders of the National Bolshevik Party (NBP); an aide to Garry Kasparov; Russian-Chechen Friendship Society Chairman Stanislav Dmitrievskiy, and Vanguard of Red Youth movement leader Sergey Udaltsov. Also detained and, in at least one instance beaten, were as many as twelve journalists, including several foreign correspondents. In addition to the would-be participants and journalists, a number of observers and passers-by were also detained and in some cases struck by the police. As of March 26, the vast majority of the estimated 110 persons detained have been released.

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City - Marchers Stand-off  
Follows Disagreement on Meeting Site  
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¶4. (SBU) The stand-off between march organizers and city authorities crystallized after "Other Russia" rejected the Nizhniy Novgorod's near-central Lenin Square as a site for its rally (reftel). With the end of the negotiations, city authorities began to harass "Other Russia," confiscating special edition newspapers announcing the march, calling in organizers for questioning, hastily scheduling a children's event for the same venue on March 24, beginning construction on the main thoroughfare along which demonstrators were to march, and deploying disinformation.

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Human Rights Ombudsman  
Intervenes with Mayor  
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¶5. (C) Deputy Director of the Nizhniy Novgorod-based United Civil Front Mikhail Yevdokimov March 26 attributed city overkill to Mayor Bulavinov's efforts to convince the Kremlin that he had the city well in hand as his current term of office comes to an end.

¶6. (C) Svetlana Gannushkina of the NGO Civil Assistance told us March 26 that she had asked GOR Human Rights Ombudsman Vladimir Lukin to intervene on March 24. Lukin, she said, had immediately via telephone urged moderation on Bulavinov. Gannushkina believed Lukin's telephone call may have restrained city authorities from filing criminal charges against any of the participants. (The media report, however, that 29 participants may face administrative charges.)

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Movement Leaders Absent  
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¶7. (C) Notably absent on march day were "Other Russia" luminaries Garry Kasparov, National Bolshevik Party Eduard Limonov, ex-Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov, and political activist Irina Khakamada. Kasparov was reportedly traveling in Germany on business, while Limonov may have been preoccupied in Moscow with GOR efforts to shut down his movement on charges of extremism.

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Suggested Press Guidance  
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¶8. (SBU) Embassy suggests the following press guidance for use in responding to inquiries about the march:

-- We are very concerned about the detention and beating of political opposition activists in Nizhniy Novgorod, who were attempting to participate in a peaceful protest, called the "march of dissent."

-- A march earlier this month in St. Petersburg was marred by similar, heavy-handed police behavior.

-- The actions of the local authorities in St. Petersburg and Nizhniy Novgorod raise serious questions about the Russian government's commitment to freedom of assembly and expression.

-- We urge the Russian government to respect freedom of the press, speech, and assembly, and to adhere fully to international standards for the protection of human rights.

-- (If asked): Has the USG raised its concerns with the GOR?  
We have expressed our concerns to the Russian government, and have urged it to respect the right to freedom of assembly.

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Comment  
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¶9. (C) The city and law enforcement authorities' overreaction in Nizhniy Novgorod is likely a by-product of several factors:

-- the precedent set by the Matvienko administration's handling of the March 3 St. Petersburg march,

-- exaggerated fears about the possibly volatile behavior of National Bolshevik Party participants,

-- inexperience in that formerly-closed city in coping with opposition street activity,

-- a desire to prove to the Kremlin that everything is under control,

-- a consensus among those in power that those who have rejected electoral politics, however constrained that environment may be, are beyond the pale.

¶10. (C) Mission is conveying our concern about the behavior of the authorities to relevant GOR officials, including the MFA and Russian Human Rights Commissioner Vladimir Lukin.  
BURNS